

**Coen Brothers
Second Edition**

With a New Introduction by the Author

Ronald Bergan

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Praise for *Coen Brothers, First Edition*

"A blow-by-blow account of the making of each movie in turn . . . Bergan has interesting things to say about the input of the Coen's collaborators . . . and also provides entertaining quotations." —*Sunday Telegraph*

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—*Economist*

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Includes all-new chapters on:

The Man Who Wasn't There (2001)

Intolerably Cruelty (2003)

The Ladykillers (2004)

No Country For Old Men (2007)

Burn After Reading (2008)

A Serious Man (2009)

True Grit (2010)

Inside Llewin Davis (2013)

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Chapter 14: Blood Complex

'This is the closest we'll come to an action movie. The most violent movie we've ever made.'

90. An American in Paris

After two misfired light comedies, and before the brothers switched to a dark piece of story telling i.e. *No Country For Old Men*, they were among 22 directors contributing to the omnibus movie, *Paris Je T'Aime*. It consisted of 18 five-minute shorts, each set in a different district of Paris which, given the title, were ostensibly supposed to be a paean to the City of Light. Like most omnibus movies, it was a mixture of the good, the bad and the ugly. The Coen's wry tale was definitely one of the good.

It takes place in the Tuileries metro station, though it could have been at any station. On one of the platforms sits a timid American tourist (Steve Buscemi), waiting impatiently for his train and reading a guidebook to Paris. He has a bagful of tourist trinkets. There are very few people around. A little boy, passing him, peppers the man with a peashooter. Then he notices a young couple (Axel Kiener and Julie Bataille) having a row on the platform opposite. Although the guidebook advises him to avoid eye contact in the Paris metro (a Coen invention), he finds himself staring at them. The boy seeing this, begins to berate the man, whom he claims desires his girlfriend. The man, probably not understanding French, but understanding the tense situation, can only make conciliatory facial expressions. He is relieved when a train arrives, hoping the couple will take it. But as the train leaves, the boy is still standing opposite but the girl (in a swift cut) is sitting beside him. In order to make her boyfriend jealous, she gives the man a long, lingering kiss. This prompts the boy to cross the train line and beat up the man, emptying the contents of his bag, including many postcards of the Mona Lisa, all over him. The young couple walk off arm in arm having made up.

According to Ethan, ‘We took some of the requirements given for the shorts, such as featuring Parisian landmarks and describing the city as being for lovers, and twisted them around, not thinking it would actually be approved.’

The menacing atmosphere of the near empty station is well caught by cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel, replacing Deakins temporarily, with an effective use of a zoom. But the strength of the short piece is in the melancholy, rubber-faced Buscemi’s wordless performance, giving him another chance in his fourth Coen movie to show off his bizarre skills.

One could argue that the short mocks the naïve American tourist, with his kitschy souvenirs and Mona Lisa cards, his eyes glued to a none too accurate guidebook. On the other hand, it is a somewhat xenophobic depiction of Parisians seen through the eyes of an American abroad. In fact, this was the only film by the Coens to be shot outside North America. After the characters in *Paris Je T’Aime*, Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) in *No Country For Old Men*, became the next character in a Coen Brothers movie to set foot outside of the United States when he crosses into Mexico. Actually, there are not too many foreigners in the Coens’ movies. Among the few are the murderous Greek husband in *Blood Simple*, the three German anarchists in *The Big Lebowski*, and a few (mostly dead) Mexicans in *No Country For Old Men* as well as the psychopathic hitman (nationality unknown) in the same film.

91 Book vs. Movie

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That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
– Those dying generations – at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long

Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.

Caught in that sensual music all neglect

Monuments of unageing intellect.

Sailing to Byzantium (W.B. Yeats)

No Country For Old Men could be seen as the completion of a ‘murder’ trilogy after *Blood Simple* **and** *Fargo*, **all** three movies featuring a cold-blooded killer who does not seem quite human.

Although there is a dark underside to most of their films, notwithstanding the genre, there is nothing covert in *No Country For Old Men*. Irredeemable actions are exposed to the light immediately. *Intolerable Cruelty* could have been a suitable title. As it was, *No Country For Old Men* was the title of the 2005 novel by US author Cormac McCarthy, which the Coens adapted.

As another departure from their effective original screenplay policy, *No Country For Old Men* was the first straight adaptation of a novel by the Coens, leaving aside their unacknowledged inspiration by specific novels by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James L. Cain and various pulp detective novels. There were also their palpable references to classic film noir and screwball comedy, not forgetting their forgettable Americanization of *The Lady Killers* and their updated loose version of Homer’s *Odyssey* that runs as a seam through *O Brother Where Art Thou?*

After the producer Scott Rudin (known mainly for his work with Wes Anderson, almost the antithesis of the Coens) bought the film rights of McCarthy's novel, he approached the brothers to adapt it for the screen. But they were busy at the time (early 2000) vainly attempting to get *To The White Sea* off the ground. The latter’s screenplay, faithful to the James Dickey novel, was the first indication that they were ready to transmute a novel into a film. But it took seven years and three more movies, after *To The White Sea* was aborted, before they got round to

No Country For Old Men. Rudin, who had waited patiently, produced the movie, also going on to produce *True Grit* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*.

There is always a difference between an original scripted film and an adaptation from a novel. Despite an acceptance that they are two different and separate art forms, there is the temptation to compare one to the other. As Dudley Andrew has written, comparing Jean Renoir's *Day In The Country* to the Guy Maupassant story, 'No matter how we judge the process or success of the film, its "being" owes something of the tale that was its inspiration and potentially its measure.'

However, it is fruitless to itemize the similarities and differences between the Coens' film and the McCarthy novel, as the majority of audiences might not have read the book. Suffice it to say, without being a pictorialization, the Coens' script was as faithful to their source material as possible, and is one of those rare films that satisfied most admirers of the literary source material.

Describing the writing process, Ethan remarked, 'One of us types into the computer while the other holds the spine of the book open flat.' Nevertheless, some pruning was necessary, and many of the monologues in the book by the sheriff Ed Tom Bell (played by Tommy Lee Jones in the movie) were astutely changed into dialogues. In fact, there is a moment when the sheriff is asked, after one of his illustrative tales (monologue in the novel), 'Why are you telling me that, Sheriff?' He replies, 'I don't know. My mind wanders.'

According to Kelly Macdonald, who plays Carla Jean, the wife of the fugitive Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin): 'the ending of the book is different. She kind of falls apart. In the film she's been through so much and she can't lose any more. It's just she's got this quiet acceptance of it.'

The Coens liked the 'pitiless quality' of the novel and identified with the way it played with genre conventions, as they had done in many of their works. 'That was familiar, congenial to us; we're naturally attracted to subverting genre,' remarked Joel. 'We liked the fact that the bad guys never really follow through on formula expectations.' He also described the McCarthy novel as 'unlike his other novels... it is much pulpier.'

Ethan was attracted by the book's 'unforgiving landscape and characters but is also about finding some kind of beauty without being sentimental.'

What did McCarthy think of the movie? According to Joel, 'We were actually sitting in a screening room with him when he saw it... and I heard him chuckle a couple of times, so I took that as a seal of approval, I don't know, maybe presumptuously.'

*****"

She kept on, kept on. Finally told me, said: I don't like the way this country is headed. I want my granddaughter to be able to have an abortion. And I said well mam I don't think you got any worries about the way the country is headed. The way I see it goin I don't have much doubt but what she'll be able to have an abortion. I'm goin to say that not only will she be able to have an abortion, she'll be able to have you put to sleep. Which pretty much ended the conversation."

- *No Country For Old Men* (Cormac McCarthy)

92 **Deep in the heart of Texas**

The Miramax Films and Paramount co-production was shot mostly in New Mexico, in and around Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and Texas. The U.S.-Mexico border crossing bridge was actually a freeway overpass in Las Vegas. By coincidence, filming in Texas took place not far from that of Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*, a similarly toned Best Picture nominee that lost out to *No Country For Old Men*.

In advance of shooting, cinematographer Roger Deakins saw that 'the big challenge' of his ninth collaboration with the Coen brothers was 'making it very realistic, to match the story... I'm imagining doing it very edgy and dark, and quite sparse. Not so stylized. Everything's storyboarded before we start shooting. In *No Country*, there's maybe only a dozen shots that are not in the final film. It's that order of planning. And we only shot 250,000 feet, whereas most productions of

that size might shoot 700,000 or a million feet of film. It's quite precise, the way Ethan and Joel approach everything.... We never use a zoom. The famous coin-tossing scene between Chigurh and the old gas station clerk is a good example; the camera tracks in so slowly that the audience isn't even aware of the move.'

93 A Bad Haircut

In the novel, Anton Chigurh, a psychopathic hitman, is described as being in his 30s, with eyes as 'blue as lapis ... Like wet stones.' For the movie, the Coens created a character 'who could have come from Mars'. His background and nationality are never mentioned, though he speaks with a light Spanish accent, due to the casting of Javier Bardem. When Cormac McCarthy visited the set, the actors inquired about Chigurh's background and if there was any symbolic significance of his name. McCarthy simply replied cryptically 'I just thought it was a cool name.'

When the Coens approached Bardem about playing Chigurh, he replied 'I don't drive. I speak bad English. And I hate violence.' With their own inner logic, they replied, 'That's why we called you'. Without hesitation, Bardem took the role, principally because he wanted to work with the Coens.

Although Bardem was recognized on the arts cinema circuit, mainly in outrageous Spanish films directed by Bigas Luna and Pedro Almodovar, and for his extraordinary immobile performance as a quadriplegic in *The Sea Inside* (2004), which won the Oscar for the Best Foreign Film, he was not well known to the general public. Speaking in an incomprehensible English accent, Bardem had just completed the role of a sadistic priest during the Spanish inquisition in Milos Forman's screwball tragedy *Goya's Ghosts* (2006), one of the few real villains he had played.

The Coens obviously saw something in him that convinced them that he was right for the role. Their perspicacity paid off as Bardem won the Best Supporting Oscar for the film, his accent having greatly improved.

Much of the impact of the character came from Chigurh's haircut, the most noted male haircut in cinema since the lack of one by Yul Brynner in *The King and I*. We first see it from the back as the handcuffed Chigurh is bundled into a police car. Then we see his face – both menacing and comical, reminiscent of a guest villain in the *Batman* TV series – framed by a shoulder-length Mod haircut of the '60s and a '70s type haircut sported by journalist Carl Bernstein.

Apparently, the Coens got the idea for the hairstyle from a 1979 photo (the year the picture is set) in a book owned by Tommy Lee Jones of a man sitting in the bar of a brothel with a very similar hairstyle and clothes to those worn by Chigurh in the film. The 'strange and unsettling' hairdo was designed by Oscar-winning hairstylist Paul LeBlanc. When Bardem first saw what it looked like on him, he told the Coens that it would prevent him from 'getting laid for three months.'

94 There Will Be Blood

Over the 122 bloody minutes of *No Country for Old Men*, Chigurh kills around a dozen people, approximately one every ten minutes. Ironically, two of the most significant murders take place off screen. Llewelyn Moss, the Vietnam vet, who flees with two million dollars in drug money that he finds in a field in Texas, pursued relentlessly by Chigurh, is killed off-screen by Mexican gangsters. David Denby of *The New Yorker* in an otherwise positive review, criticized the way the Coens 'disposed' of Llewelyn Moss. 'The Coens, however faithful to the book', he wrote, 'cannot be forgiven for disposing of Llewelyn so casually. After watching this foolhardy but physically gifted and decent guy escape so many traps, we have a great deal invested in him emotionally, and yet he's eliminated, off-camera, by some unknown Mexicans. He doesn't get the dignity of a death scene.'

Carla Jean's death by the hit-man, is also not seen. We only know of her murder when Chigurh leaves the house, checking the sole's of his boots for blood. This is a reminder of the earlier scene in a hotel room after Chigurh kills Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson), a cocky bounty hunter, when he places his feet up on the bed and coolly continues a telephone conversation as the blood spreads across the floor.

On the much discussed violence in the film, Joel thought it ‘very important to the story... We couldn't conceive it, sort of soft pedalling that in the movie, and really doing a thing resembling the book ... it's about a character confronting a very arbitrary violent brutal world, and you have to see that.’ Moreover, the Coens thought 'That stuff is such fun to do. Javier would come in by the end of the movie, rub his hands together and say, “OK, who am I killing today? It's fun to figure out how to choreograph it, how to shoot it, how to engage audiences watching it.’

As always there is a thin line in the depiction of violence between glorifying it and condemning it. However, audiences, used to a ‘wages of sin’ payoff, never get the satisfaction of seeing the bad guy get his comeuppance. Chigurh seems immortal as he trundles off, last seen after a car accident, with his bleeding arm in a makeshift sling made from a shirt he buys from a young boy.

95 The Evil That Men Do

No Country For Old Men brings to mind the brutal films of Sam Peckinpah, notably *Bring Me The Head of Alfredo Garcia*. The Coens acknowledged similarities between their movie and those by Peckinpah. ‘Hard men in the southwest shooting each other – that's definitely Sam Peckinpah's thing. We were aware of those similarities, certainly,’ said Ethan.

Like Peckinpah’s films, and unlike the Coens’ previous pictures, humour is in short supply in *No Country For Old Men*, unless one counts an underlying black humour in some the dialogue, and a certain quirkiness in the cast of redneck characters who pop up in an under-populated and harsh rural Texas, the antithesis of a Norman Rockwell cosy view of America.

Of all the characters, Carla Jean, as Llewelyn Moss’s hapless wife, played with an impeccable Texas accent by Scottish actress Kelly McDonald, is the only one who merits our sympathy and to which some identification can be made. We instinctively warm to her mainly because we yearn to care about someone.

Nevertheless, it is the sheriff with whom the audience is invited to identify. Craggy-faced Tommy Lee Jones had made a living by playing pugnacious, oddball characters living beyond the borders of respectability. Here he is a laconic, world-

wearily observer of the cat-and-mouse game being played in which he feels ‘overmatched’. It is the sheriff, on the trail of Chigurh and Moss, and on the point of retirement, whose voice is heard at the beginning, indicating that it is his story he is narrating. He is the old man who realizes that it is no country in which to live. He laments the increasing violence in a region where he, like his father and grandfather before him, has risen to the office of sheriff, and bemoans the fact that ‘God has not entered my life.’ Hard to warm to such a negative character.

Despite the cold-hearted, ‘pulpy’ nature of the film, the Coens cleverly manipulated the three principal male characters who, though being linked in the fatalistic plot, are never seen in the same frame. The movie also manages to mix two American film genres, the film noir and the Western, though it would be three years later that the Coens would tackle their first full-blooded western in *True Grit*.

96 **Brothers Triumphans**

No Country for Old Men was nominated for eight Academy Awards, winning four, Best Picture, Best Director(s), Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor (Javier Bardem). It was only the second time in Oscar history that two directors shared the award following Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins for *West Side Story*, almost 50 years before. It was the Coens’ most triumphant Oscar night yet, after having won two Academy Awards – Best Actress and Best Screenplay for *Fargo*.

On receiving the statuette, Joel said, ‘Ethan and I have been making stories with movie cameras since we were kids... Honestly, what we do now doesn't feel that much different from what we were doing then. We're very thankful to all of you out there for continuing to let us play in our corner of the sandbox.’

Javier Bardem, who had almost equal screen time with his co-actors, but was nevertheless given a Supporting Actor award, became the first Spanish actor to win an Oscar. ‘Thank you to the Coens for being crazy enough to think I could do that and put one of the most horrible hair cuts in history on my head,’ Bardem said in his acceptance speech. Then in Spanish, he dedicated the award to Spain and to his mother, the Spanish movie and television actress Pilar Bardem, who accompanied him to the ceremony. ‘Mama, this is for you. This is for your grandparents and

your parents, Rafael and Matilde [also actors]; this is for the performers of Spain who like you have brought dignity and pride to our profession. This is for Spain and this is for all of you.'

.....

''There's this boy I sent to the electric chair on my testimony. He killed a 14-year-old girl. The newspapers described it as a crime of passion, but he told me there weren't nothin' passionate about it. Said he'd been fixin' to kill someone for as long as he could remember. Said if I let him out of there, he'd kill somebody again. Said he was goin' to hell.

Reckoned he'd be there in about 15 minutes.'

- The opening narration by Sheriff Bell (Tommy Lee Jones).
